

Zac Efron and
Hugh Jackman

OLD SCHOOL MUSICAL

The *Greatest Showman* director Michael Gracey on meeting Hugh Jackman, casting Zendaya, and the film's eight-year journey to the screen.



**Director
Michael Gracey**

The *Greatest Showman* is a biography – albeit fictionalised – of the life of P.T. Barnum: showman, circus presenter and entrepreneur. For director Michael Gracey, the film's success would depend upon whom he selected as its star. Fortunately, Gracey had a bit of history with renowned performer Hugh Jackman.

"There was a commercial out of Paris for Lipton Ice Tea that

was between me and a French director," recalls Gracey. "The agency assumed that I knew Hugh Jackman so they gave me the job. It was an amazing, big-budget commercial, so I didn't correct them. I didn't say that I didn't know him, so we just let that sit. But then, of course, on

he comes over and hugs me. He is hugging me and he whispers 'They think I don't know you, mate. Just go along with it,' and we pretended to be best friends."

Of course, one thing led to another, and eight years later *The Greatest Showman* finally saw the light of day. By any standards,

"We spent over three years with Benji [Pasek] and Justin [Paul] writing the music. At the time no one knew who they were. We worked on this before the Tonys for *Dear Evan Hansen* and before *La La Land*. They were just guys who had done an Off-Broadway musical.

"Music is so subjective. There's a Walt Disney quote, 'Make it so good, they have to want it,' and that became our mantra. These songs just had to stick in your head. These songs have to be so good it is undeniable. Even if you don't like musicals you have to go, 'Well, yes, that song I heard, the next day I couldn't get it out of my head.' We worked really hard and it is to their credit because at this point we did not have a green-lit film. In some of our darkest moments we would be sitting there listening to a song as incredible as *This Is Me*

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the first day of rehearsal with Hugh Jackman showing up, all of the agency people were there to see the big star. And Hugh walks in and he goes, 'Michael!' and

eight years is a long time for a film to be in production – so what took so long?

"A big part of it was writing the songs," explains Gracey.



thinking, 'Maybe no one will ever hear this song,' which is terrible, but it would be true if the film didn't get made."

When making a musical, it's very easy for actors to get their scripts and simply read the songs as dialogue. For Gracey, that simply wouldn't do – so he took the scripts off his actors.

"In a musical, you sing when words no longer suffice. You sing when you are at an emotional low point and you can't find the words to express yourself, or an emotional high and your joy breaks into song."

The director felt that if the actors were relying on their scripts too much, the emotion in the songs wouldn't be genuine. "So we stopped giving out the script and we did something more akin to a process you would go through on a Broadway show. We would get everybody in a room and we'd get Hugh and a bunch of Broadway stars and we would just read the script and people would stand at the piano and sing the songs. That became the best way for us to gauge where the script was at. It also became the best way to show people what we were intending to make. That's how we found Keala [Settle], who plays the bearded lady. She was one of the Broadway stars who sat in on our very first read-through and the


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very first moment she opened her mouth it was like, 'Yeah!'

As for one of the other female stars of the film, Gracey had barely even heard of Zendaya before he met with her for *The Greatest Showman*. Thankfully, he thought she was perfect for the role of trapeze artist Anne Wheeler.

"I didn't know of her enormous following. I felt incredibly old when I had to have her background explained to me. But I met her and I was just so impressed with her because for a girl so young she has the most amazing maturity to her. And her singing, dancing and acting are just beyond reproach. In terms of working with people, she just blew everyone away. Again, she takes up no space in the room, meaning during rehearsals she will sit in the

corner and happily hit play on the iPod while we have a dance rehearsal. Or she's not even on for another one or two hours or she's finished and she just wants to hang out. She is so laid back and so genuine about her enjoyment of what we were creating, even when that was in rehearsals."

Gracey adds that Zendaya also did many of her own stunts. "She did the most amazing trapeze rehearsal and she would send me photos of her hands all blistered up from the trapeze work she was doing. And then she would send other shots of her flying through the air and being caught and she would have a little fist power punch. I'd get this amazing shot of her flying from one trapeze to the next. She would have moments when she would just be looking over at Hugh or at Zac [Efron], and it is just the presence that she has. It is just incredible. I feel very indebted to her, not only for what she did on screen but also because she was one of those people who backed my vision for this. She supported it and she fought for it and she's this new breed of star. I think she is going to be one of the biggest movie stars in the world. I really do." 

• *The Greatest Showman* is out now

The **GREATEST SOUNDTRACK**

The Greatest Showman's original soundtrack has been a triumph, reaching platinum sales Down Under and spending weeks at number one on the ARIA Albums chart. The record's breakout single – *This Is Me* – received global radio airplay and earned itself a Golden Globe for Best Original Song in a Motion Picture, as well as an Oscar nomination for Best Original Song.

